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On comparative approaches to rhetoric in ancient China

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Ralph Weber

On comparative approaches to rhetoric in ancient China

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In the secondary literature on ancient China one finds a line of reasoning that, if persuasive, would imply that each and any approach relying on categories or concepts such as “rhetoric” is misconceived at best and an instance of epistemic violence at worst.¹ Here is how the line of reasoning is frequently presented. First, some rather straightforward and uncontroversial statements are given. “Rhetoric”, it is said, is a word in the English language (just check the mighty *Oxford English Dictionary*). Then, the reader is reminded that the etymon of the word *rhetoric* is classical Latin *rhetorice*, harking back to Greek *rhētorikḗ*. In Greco-Roman antiquity, the reasoning continues, rhetoric was from some point onwards conceived of as an art (*téchnē*, *ars*), an acquired skill (*ars oratoria*, *ars dicendi*) or an ability (*eloquentia*), as everybody knows and the *New Pauly* surely confirms. In fact, the art of rhetoric was practised by orators in various social and institutional arenas, taught by teachers and examined by philosophers. Some rhetoricians acted at once as orators, teachers and philosophers, while others focused on one or two of the activities only. Important for the reasoning is the fact that these activities were central both to ancient Greece and Rome, although the arenas in which rhetoricians pursued them shifted throughout history with the changing social and institutional orders that prevailed. Up to this point, not much of a dispute appears to arise, since to the extent that these statements are true, they are certainly true enough.

On such or similar basis it is then often concluded that rhetoric had been invented in ancient Greece and that it need therefore be somehow a singularly or

¹ An example somewhere in between misconception and epistemic violence is the following statement by Gernet on an “organicist” type of thought in 5th to 3rd century BC China: “[T]his thought had its own framework and themes. It was concerned with questions that, at least, until quite recently, attracted little or no interest in the West. So it would be fruitless to expect it to manifest those philosophical preoccupations which dominate the Western tradition, and unjust to use our own categories when analyzing it.” Vernant and Gernet 1996: 84.

exclusively Greco-Roman category or concept. Again, no doubt, there might be some truth as to the claim for invention. (Yet, as it stands, in the absence of detail on the rhetoric that is presumed to have been invented, the conclusion might be true and false at the same time.) Perhaps it might even be appropriate to refer to rhetoric as a Greco-Roman category or concept. Yet, what to make of the claim of singularity or exclusivity? That claim seems to be based on an “enthymemic” argument, that is, an argument that involves unstated assumptions. Scrutinizing the assumptions will show that the claim of singularity is either unfounded or banal (or both) whereas the claim of exclusivity is perhaps sound, but of necessity post-comparative (how else would you know that x is exclusive to a if you did not compare and check for x in b , c , etc.).² If the post-comparative claim of exclusivity hence comes to be used – bringing the line of reasoning to its desired conclusion – in order to show that a comparative approach to rhetoric beyond ancient Greece and Rome is misconceived or an instance of epistemic violence, then one ends up in a contradiction: if exclusivity is a result of comparison, then this sufficiently proves the conduciveness to fruitful comparison of the category or concept claimed to be exclusive. The exclusivity cannot possibly come to stand in the way of comparison. Brought to such a conclusion, the line of reasoning evidently fails to be persuasive.

So, if comparative approaches to rhetoric in ancient China are not frustrated due to Greco-Roman singularity or exclusivity of the category or concept of rhetoric, what then can be said about the possibilities and limits of such approaches? For posing this question in a meaningful way, let alone answering it, it is imperative to lay out as clearly as possible some few fundamentals about comparison itself and to give a short discussion about what the concept of rhetoric might amount to in a comparative framework as well as about what it cannot possibly amount to. In any case, this is how the following comments are structured.

1 Some fundamentals about comparison

A comparison of something with itself seems futile if that something is truly identical in all possible aspects. Comparison hence always involves two or more *comparanda*, which are put one next to the other in view of an aspect that is presumed to be common to both *comparanda*, the so-called *tertium comparationis*. If, for example, ancient Greece and ancient China are chosen for comparison in

² The claim for invention is no less post-comparative; it amounts to a sort of exclusivity at a given time.

view of their rhetoric, then ancient Greece and ancient China each comes to serve as a *comparandum* and rhetoric as a *tertium comparationis*. That there is rhetoric to be compared here and there which is in some sense the same rhetoric is presumed by such a comparative framework. The framework presumes also other commonalities between the *comparanda*, which, clustered together, I call the pre-comparative *tertium*, such as the common description or qualification of Greece and China in terms of both being ancient and possibly some common background against which a distinction between Greece on the one side and China on the other is drawn (e.g. Greece and China as “civilizations”, as “cultures”, as “language communities”, etc.). The distinction between pre-comparative *tertium* and the *tertium comparationis* is a matter of emphasis mainly, to be sure, as each refers to commonalities describing or qualifying the *comparanda*. But the former refers to commonalities that are not explicitly or not primarily put up for comparison, whereas the latter specifies the common aspects at the centre of the comparative inquiry. The distinction, however, is useful precisely because comparison is to be understood as part of an inquiry.

To inquire into something means to acknowledge that there is something not yet known, something perhaps only presumed but not yet confirmed, or something vague to be clarified. Inquiries might be motivated by different concerns. The inquiry that makes use of comparison might concern only one of the *comparanda* involved in the comparison, or it might equally concern all of them, or aim at something that is quintessentially beyond them (which would make the use of comparison purely instrumental). Sometimes it is suggested – along a variant of the above mentioned line of reasoning – that overfamiliarity with one *comparandum* and large-scale ignorance of the other might frustrate a comparative inquiry and, for example, force a set of *tertia comparationis* on the less familiar *comparandum* that is unduly or overtly drawn from the more familiar *comparandum*. It seems, however, that when faced with something unfamiliar or unknown, it is often at once most natural and effective to compare it with something that is presumably familiar or known and, at first glance at least, somehow considered to be similar. In just any case, if comparison is understood as part of an inquiry, then there is some pre-comparative vagueness informing the purpose of the inquiry. In the course of inquiry that vagueness will undergo change together with the *comparanda* that presumably are coming to be better known (by themselves but also relationally, i.e. one in view of the other).

When comparing, in other words, *comparanda* (that which is to be compared) are transformed into *comparata* (that which has been compared). What has served as pre-comparative *tertium* might, by dint of comparison, prove no longer to be considered a commonality of the *comparata*. In the process, new *tertia comparationis* might become relevant, standing in a complicated relation to

the initial pre-comparative *tertium*. At the end of the comparison, the pre-comparative vagueness might have been removed or simply have given way to a post-comparative vagueness that might in turn serve as a basis for a new comparative inquiry. The distinctions drawn help formulate some limits of comparison, which I have elsewhere described as follows: “[...] the resulting *comparata* are still in some important sense the same as the initial *comparanda*. In some sense, but not in another; for they are the same and they are different. Would they not be the same in any sense, but just be different, then the comparison would not have been about what it was supposed (and perhaps announced) to be about. Would they be just the same and no different, then no inquiry and no comparison would have taken place.”³ In more ways than I can mention here, the fundamental philosophical puzzle underlying all comparison is how anything (or any two things) can be the same but different.

Above, I have claimed that some same rhetoric to be compared here and there is presumed by a comparison of rhetoric between ancient Greece and ancient China. This might seem blatantly wrong and requires explanation. Obviously, the result of a comparison of rhetoric might exactly be that there is rhetoric in ancient Greece, but no rhetoric in ancient China. The *New Pauly*, for example, comes close to such a finding when stating: “It is true that some forms of rhetoric can also be found outside European culture, but they tend not to achieve the same degree of elaboration that is a hallmark of Greco-Roman antiquity.”⁴ Having only *forms* of rhetoric, *they* seem decidedly not to boast the real thing. Such a finding (however Eurocentric it might strike the reader to be) is theoretically entirely possible. Whereas one kind of asserted difference that comparison may yield relates to a *tertium comparationis* by claiming one form of it here and another form there, another kind of asserted difference relates to a *tertium comparationis* by claiming it only here but not there (the *New Pauly* of course proves that “form” may also be used deceptively to mean “not there”). For an obvious example of the latter kind of asserted difference, consider comparing two cities and their public transport systems, in which case it would be entirely reasonable to reach the conclusion that one city has a subway whereas the other has none, the *tertium comparationis* being “having a subway”.

This point, finally, is to acknowledge the fundamentality of the person doing the comparison, for a comparison is always done by someone, standing between the *comparanda*, conceiving of the pre-comparative *tertium* in one way or another, and choosing which commonalities to put up for comparison at the centre

³ Weber 2015 (forthcoming).

⁴ Walde 2006.

of the inquiry. It should, however, not go unnoticed that the city that turned out not to have a subway *could* have had one. This is why the person comparing the public transport systems of the two cities was making use of the *tertium comparationis* in the first place. That it could have had a subway is an important presumption brought to the comparison from the side of the comparing person, and it is a presumption that must stand its ground (e.g. under the scrutiny of peers or the public) if the comparison is to be persuasive. The basic relatability of the *tertium comparationis* to a *comparandum* demarcates a limit of comparison that makes comparisons appear scandalous where it seems impossible to argue for such a relatability (as, say, in a comparison between a crocodile and the number two for their digestibility after having been eaten). It is in this sense that a comparison between ancient Greece and ancient China must presume some same rhetoric to be compared here and there. It must be presumed that the result of the comparison for rhetoric could possibly be that there is rhetoric here and there, even if it is the contrary that emerges from the comparison.

The person doing the comparison is also crucial with regard to the point of (over-)familiarity, for obviously it is to somebody that the one *comparandum* is or appears more familiar than the other. I have already remarked that familiarity is a double-edged sword, possibly facilitating or hindering comparison. If the point of familiarity is combined with the claim of exclusivity, as when “Western” comparers are charged for using “Greco-Roman” categories or concepts, a series of issues emerge. One is theoretical, since the familiarity undermines the exclusivity unless “Western” comparers are somehow claimed not only to be familiar with, but active users of the exclusive “Greco-Roman” categories and concepts. The exclusivity would have to extend to cover not only ancient Greece and Rome, but also the “modern West”. Against this kind of continuity stand, for instance, the repeated warnings of such distinguished scholars as Geoffrey Lloyd, who emphasizes the hermeneutical distance between ancient Greece and the contemporary world.⁵ Familiarity might turn out to be chimerical, after all, as there might be less of it around than is usually assumed. In any case, under a dynamic view of comparison, it would seem that the less familiar *comparandum* inevitably has to become more familiar, reducing the danger associated with overfamiliarity or the benefit of using what is familiar to learn about what is not familiar. It might even occasionally be the case that “Western” comparers are more familiar with the “non-Western” *comparandum* than their alleged “Greco-Roman” categories or concepts would allow them to be (since surely and without knowing they are operating from within that surreptitiously sedimented stock of exclusive concepts

⁵ Lloyd 2004: 188.

and categories, that is, notwithstanding the heaps of literature and strenuous effort that a sinologist had to engage in to become a specialist and notwithstanding the little he or she might be acquainted with any detail of the Greco-Roman conceptual world).

2 What rhetoric in a comparative approach might and might not mean

Comparative approaches to rhetoric in ancient China might (and often do) draw on a *tertium comparationis* that is informed by some or another understanding of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Yet, from a contemporary and a theoretical standpoint, nothing particularly recommends such an approach, as there are plenty of other understandings of rhetoric available, so much so that scholars of Greco-Roman rhetoric have to be very clear that their subject-matter is different from more recent rhetoric, which to them cannot but appear as “deformed, by way of reduction or extension of its authentic realm [i.e. of rhetoric properly speaking].”⁶ Nothing speaks against adopting an understanding of rhetoric that is informed by 20th century scholarship in areas as different as literature, semiotics, hermeneutics, or philosophy. The “new rhetoric” of a Chaim Perelman or of a Kenneth Burke might provide for an understanding of rhetoric that is just perfectly suited for a comparative approach to rhetoric in early China – even and no less than if the comparison happens to be with ancient Greece.

Whatever understanding of rhetoric is employed in a comparison as *tertium comparationis*, it makes much difference whether the comparing person is aware of it, has reflected upon it, has made the choice transparent, and perhaps has bothered to give reasons for choosing so. Something similar can of course be said about cooperative academic endeavours on rhetoric in ancient China, which, like comparison, are a putting of one thing next to another (one participant’s understanding of rhetoric next to another’s), and are probably only successful to the extent that some underlying commonalities emerge more plainly to, and are reflected upon and clarified by, the cooperating participants. This is not to deny the possible value of productive misunderstanding, of talking past each other, of becoming aware of one’s own understanding by exposure to the different understanding of others, etc. But it would seem slightly disconcerting should there be little or no common understanding driving a cooperative endeavour worthy of the

⁶ Andersen 2001: 18.

name; at least “rhetorically”, such commonalities would as a matter of course often find affirmation.

The meaning of rhetoric deployed in a comparative approach might therefore vary with good reason and depend on factors as different as the particular aims and purposes attached to a comparison, disciplinary conventions and predispositions towards some pre-comparative *tertium*, or the availability and nature of the material to be examined. To give some examples: The understanding of rhetoric might build on a contrast with truth or rather take rhetoric as a means to articulate truth (and be negatively or positively connoted), or not be related to truth at all, say, as harmless embellishment for the sake of aesthetic pleasure. It might or might not be tied to the ethical project of a *vir bonus*, as it was for Quintilian, or be understood as a “natural phenomenon” shared by humans and other animals.⁷ It might hinge on aspects of rhetoric in terms of orality or textuality, focus on texts discussing rhetoric (as only few texts do) or on texts exhibiting the use of rhetoric (as arguably all texts do), or concentrate on the figure of the rhetorician, be it as “masters of truth” or as “masters of disguise”. With the former, of whom Marcel Detienne has said that each “is also a master of deception”, attention might shift to early democratic practices or “the workings of argued justice” as fundamentally informing what rhetoric is taken to be.⁸ Quite a different understanding could be gleaned from reading a master of disguise such as Han Feizi and his “Shui Nan” (說難) chapter, which places persuasion and rhetoric in quite a different political context, the one of ministers in the service of a ruler.⁹

Whatever rhetoric is eventually taken to mean (and not anything might work, that is, in the sense of being persuasive to others as a possible meaning of rhetoric), there is of course the danger of conceptual overstretch whereby rhetoric comes to mean everything, loses all analytical purchase and therefore ends up meaning nothing. However, there is also another danger, which is more subtle and omnipresent in discussions of comparative approaches. It rests on a confusion of what comparison does and is intimately related to variants of the claim of singularity, which, I have posited, is either unfounded or banal (or both). It is banal if it is to claim that the sort of rhetoric that was invented and thrived in ancient Greece is a singular event in history that cannot be compared (in the sense of being likened) to anything else in history. Taken in its singularity, that is surely the case, since no singularity could possibly be likened to anything else without thereby loosening its singularity. That is what singularity means. No use of words can capture it; singularity is a claim that is posited to be beyond language. Saying

⁷ Kennedy 1998: 4.

⁸ Detienne 1996: 86, 117.

⁹ Watson (transl.) 1964: 73–79.

that something is singular (or unique, peerless, incomparable, *sui generis*) like something else is singular undermines its singularity. Not to be mistaken, it is an assertion and a presupposition that despite its banality bears considerable importance, even for comparative approaches (for one wants to think of and perhaps does well to fancy one's *comparanda* /*comparata* as being very much singular), but it bears no importance whatsoever for the *tertium comparationis*. Thinking that one could possibly take the singularity of ancient Greek (or any other) rhetoric as a *tertium comparationis* for a comparative approach is unfounded. If the *tertium comparationis* is not considered a transcendental notion, but adopted from some empirical case, then it has to be an *abstraction* of the singularity of that case that like a concept can be predicated over the many, at least in the sort of relatability mentioned above (which, again, is precisely what is rejected by the claim of singularity). Perhaps it is useful to conceptualize the abstraction on a scale running from maximal particularity (bordering on singularity) to the highest of generality, where both ends of the scale appear "singularly" unattractive for the purposes of comparison. Both maximal particularity and maximal generality would pre-empt the result of the comparison, since with the former only differences and with the latter only commonalities could possibly arise. In this respect, comparison comes down to choosing an appropriate level of abstraction, i.e. of particularity or generality. What exact level of abstraction is chosen in a case at hand has myriad implications.

Say, the understanding of rhetoric to be used in a study of rhetoric in early China is adopted from the empirical case of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Often, what happens is that someone proposes and puts up for discussion an understanding of rhetoric at a certain level of abstraction only to be countered by someone else insisting (in all validity and with good evidence) that actually, more precisely, or as a matter of fact, in the Greco-Roman case rhetoric was understood to be so and so. One way of understanding the second discussant is to take him or her as pitting the singularity of the case against the generality of the proposed understanding of rhetoric. This sort of objection is, as I have tried to persuade the reader in these pages, unfounded and possibly the result of a confusion of what comparison is and should be about. Another way of understanding the second discussant is to take him or her as proposing a more particular level of abstraction. This sort of objection is more reasonable and productive, but it is important to understand that the objection is not against what Greco-Roman rhetoric was *really like*, but against a level of abstraction considered for whatever reason inappropriate. It is, by the way, easily comprehensible that specialists, given their expertise and knowledge of as much detail as possible, should tend towards more particularity and find it difficult to accept generalization. Yet, if the discussion is about an un-

derstanding of rhetoric for comparative purposes, then generalization is all it is about.

The implication of having to choose a level of abstraction cannot be overestimated. The level of abstraction chosen anticipates to no minor extent the results of the comparison and crucially qualifies how the results have to be understood. There seems to be a direct relation pertaining between the level of abstraction and the result of a comparison in terms of commonalities and differences (or similarities and dissimilarities). Any move on the scale of abstraction towards more generality should produce more commonality and less difference, as any move in the opposite direction, towards more particularity, should end up showing more difference and less commonality. These mechanisms and the relations between the levels of abstraction chosen for a *tertium comparationis* and the outcome of a comparison deserve more attention and critical study. An important preliminary observation concerns the qualification of the results of a comparison as being necessarily contingent insofar as any set of commonalities and differences that come out of the comparison are directly related to the chosen level of abstraction. Because of this contingency, the entire comparative exercise might appear somewhat futile or similar to analysis (in that one does not know more after the analysis than before, but perhaps only more clearly), were it not for the fact that comparison is an inquiry that transforms the pre-comparative *tertium* and quite naturally brings up new *tertia comparationis*.¹⁰ Comparison as inquiry is a powerful tool, but much of its power is lost, when resulting commonalities and differences are not understood as fundamentally relational notions, i.e. fundamentally related to the level of abstractness that the comparing person chooses to adopt. Despite all of that contingency, comparison can produce surprising results as when a low level of abstraction (high particularity) leads to significant commonalities or a very high level of abstraction (high generality) still brings out differences.

In conclusion, let me briefly illustrate these points by returning to the statement quoted above from the *New Pauly*: “It is true that some forms of rhetoric can also be found outside European culture, but they tend not to achieve the same

¹⁰ John Stuart Mill emphasized a similar point against William Whewell: “It is not (as Mr. Whewell seems to suppose,) a law of our intellect, that in comparing things with each other and taking note of their agreement we merely recognise as realized in the outward world something that we already had in our minds. The conception originally found its way to us as the *result* of such a comparison. It was obtained (in metaphysical phrase,) by *abstraction* from individual things. These things may be things which we perceived or thought of on former occasions, but they may also be the things which we are perceiving or thinking on the very occasion” [emphasis in the original]. See Mill 2011, 2: 214.

degree of elaboration that is a hallmark of Greco-Roman antiquity.” The statement reads like the result of a comparison, in which the *comparata* are easily identified as “Greco-Roman antiquity” (and, by implication and most revealingly, “European culture”) on the one and that what is “outside European culture” on the other side. The *tertium comparationis* is rhetoric, which is understood as something that can come in different “forms” and in various “degree[s] of elaboration”. The outcome of the comparison is an apparently clearly articulated difference: “the same degree of elaboration [of rhetoric] that is a hallmark of Greco-Roman antiquity” is absent “outside European culture”. I take it that the “same degree of elaboration” seeks to emphasize *elaboration* as meaning high elaboration or a high degree thereof, for if it meant exactly *the degree* of elaboration, it would imply a claim of singularity and be merely stating the obvious. All hinges on how the high elaboration of rhetoric is conceptualized and how much it is abstracted from the asserted singularity of “Greco-Roman antiquity”. As far as I can see, the statement gives us no clue in this regard. In the absence of any indication of the level of abstraction, let alone any clue, we are almost completely at a loss as to how to estimate the value of the asserted difference. The difference, no doubt, says something and perhaps something important about the *comparata* as well as the person comparing. But it has its full meaning only if viewed in relation to the chosen level of abstraction, and depending on the particularity or generality of that level, the result of the comparison might come as more or less of a surprise or confirm what was to be expected.

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